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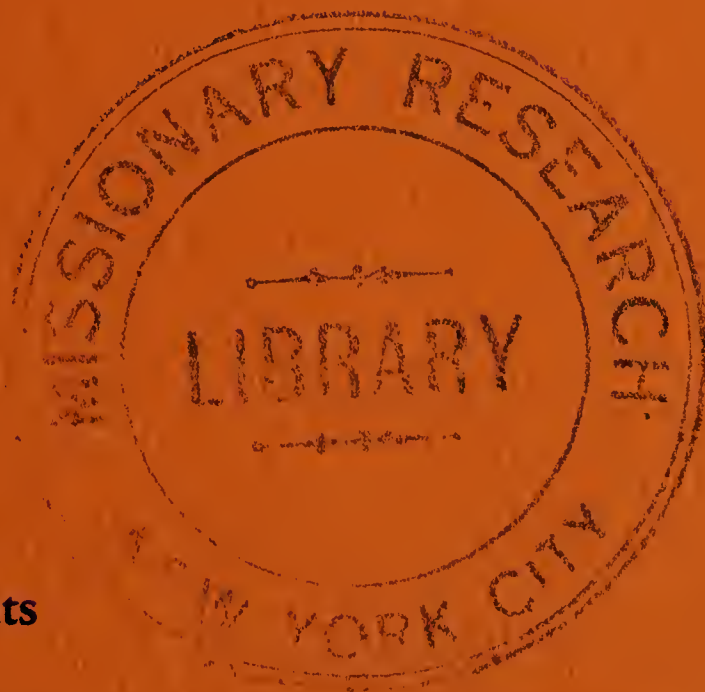
With a Smile

The Story of

JACOB GASS

By

TH. C. SEYBOLD



15 Cents

STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT

156 Fifth Avenue, New York

Saint with a Smile

Jacob Gass

by

TH. C. SEYBOLD

“**H**AS GOD work for me to do? Has he a plan for my life? Will he guide me in the choice of my lifework if I seek his guidance?”

Young Jacob Gass, too, found he could not escape such questions, and he passed through many inner struggles before he was sure of the answers. The answers, however, came with certainty, and the joy of the assurance that he had a call from God shone through the whole of his life service. In his unfinished autobiography, he tells us that at first he rebelled at the idea of becoming a minister and a missionary. He wanted to be a businessman, like his father.

He was born February 6, 1866, in Liestal, Switzerland. Although he lost his mother when he was only four, his childhood was a happy one. His father married again, and his stepmother was very good to him.

His father was much interested in mission work, but as head of a silk-weaving establishment, he desired that his son join him in this business. So he introduced Jacob to the work very early, teaching him accounting and business methods. Little did he realize then that he was preparing his son to become a missionary statesman and administrator. Throughout his life, Gass was businesslike in the handling of mission funds and activities. Also, he learned to work with people. He often remarked to fellow missionaries: “It is easy to dismiss a man but hard to make a man; it is our business to make men.”

Jacob's first struggle began when he finished his high-school course and expressed the desire to attend the university at Basel

for further studies. His father, however, had decided otherwise, so young Gass yielded to his wishes and went to Geneva to become a volunteer apprentice in a wholesale house and to learn French. He enjoyed the early days in Geneva, and soon found himself a member of a group of carefree and lighthearted companions. Although he attended church and the meetings of the Young Men's Christian Association, because of the character of some of these friends he was nevertheless in real danger of drifting away from the Christian teaching he had received. Yet this place of great temptation turned out to be his spiritual birthplace.

One day he was ill, and went to see a French physician who had been recommended to him. This physician was an earnest Christian. Very soon he and Gass were engaged in a discussion of spiritual things, and before letting him go, the doctor suggested that they have a prayer together. This incident marked the turning point in Gass' life. He felt that he could not be an earnest Christian and continue with the group he had chosen as friends. One day he went out for a walk on the lake side, and decided to face the issue. Finding a lonely spot, he poured out his heart to God in prayer. Suddenly he was filled with a great sense of peace, and he accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal savior. He broke away from his associates and threw himself wholeheartedly into the activities of the Y.M.C.A.

Soon after this, he became acquainted with a city missionary of Geneva. As they were talking one day, the missionary asked him whether he had ever thought of entering the ministry. He replied that, not only had he not thought it, but that it was about the last thing he would want to do. The answer was given quickly enough, but the thought remained in his heart; he could not shake it off. So he turned to God, asking him to reveal his will to him. The answer came so clearly that he knew that God was calling him into his special service.

He immediately wrote his father about his great decision, and in reply was warned against falling a victim to spiritual pride. The director of the wholesale business house in which he was working was shocked when he heard it, and did his best to deter Gass from his purpose. Why did Jacob want to be a minister and spend his life in poverty, the director asked as he offered him a post in the business with a salary far greater than any he was ever to receive

throughout his missionary career. When this man realized, however, that Gass was convinced that God had called him, he said: "If it is God's will, then you must obey." His father later gave the same advice, but was worried about the cost of the theological training. He nevertheless encouraged his son to go on with his plans, saying: "If God has called you, he will see you through."

Strong in this new-found conviction of God's call, Jacob entered the seminary in Basel. And God did see him through; for, when he was at the end of his resources, he received a letter from a friend in Geneva containing one hundred francs. At about the same time, he was informed by the president of the seminary that a scholarship had become available; would he care to try for it? He did try and won it. From then on his financial worries in the seminary were over.

But, as he soon discovered, his inner struggles were not at an end. Shortly before completing his course, he was informed by the president of the seminary that three requests for candidates had come to him: one for a vicar in one of the churches in Switzerland, another for a man to fill the post of secretary of the Swiss Y.M.C.A., and the third from the Reverend Mr. Huber, president of the Foreign Mission Board of the Evangelical Synod of North America, for a missionary to India. Gass gave little thought to the third, but he told the president that he wanted to do whatever God wished him to do, and that he would pray about it and then give him his answer.

One evening one of his fellow students, who was a volunteer for Africa, requested him to accompany him to a certain doctor who was to examine him as to his physical fitness for service in Africa. Gass went with him, thinking that it would be interesting to let the doctor examine him as well. "The doctor may find that I am not fit to go to the tropics," he thought, "and so I will be rid of the question." The doctor examined them both, then wrote to the president of the seminary: "The young man whom you sent to me as a candidate for Africa is hardly fit for the tropics. But this man Gass is in excellent condition; send him there." This compelled him to face the issue anew, and again he received the conviction that God wanted him to become a missionary. The assurance of this call from God sustained Gass throughout his life, no matter what difficulties and problems he had to face in his long missionary service.

Gass then received a formal call to be a missionary in India from the Board of Foreign Missions of the Evangelical Synod of North America (now the Evangelical and Reformed Church). He was asked to go to America for further study, and spent a year in Niagara University at Buffalo, New York, where he studied medicine. He had hoped to complete the course, but the need for reinforcements in India was so acute that more time could not be granted him.

He arrived in Bombay on the fifth of October, 1893, and proceeded to Birsampur, in the Central Provinces. After six months he was transferred to Raipur, where he remained for the whole of his missionary service in India.

After he had been in India for several years Gass became acquainted with Miss Elizabeth Laengle, a teacher in Basel, through mutual friends. After some months of correspondence, they became engaged, and were so assured of God's guidance that Miss Laengle proceeded to India, where they met for the first time. Their married life was an exceedingly happy one, though not without sorrows. The young couple lost their first boy soon after his birth, and their second son Paul, a most promising boy, at the age of twelve. They had the joy, however, of seeing their third son, Herbert, become a medical missionary and join his father. Herbert is at present medical superintendent of one of the largest leprosy hospitals in India.

There are some people whose presence speaks long before they utter a word. At their appearance, an audience grows quiet just because it is dominated by their personality. Gass was such a person. When in a group or at a dinner party, interest somehow centered about him, and strangers who had met him but once remembered him long afterward. He was an excellent conversationalist and possessed a wide range of knowledge. He could readily carry on a conversation in German, French, English, or Hindi, as required. When occasion demanded, he quoted easily from Latin and Greek, and occasionally from Hebrew. His genial disposition, however, coupled with the remarkable way with which he disciplined himself and the consecration and spiritual insight he revealed accounted most for his personal magnetism. If we add to this a fine sense of humor—characterized by one of his friends as “the humor of the Saints”—we can understand that it was easy for Gass to feel at

home in any group and to make others feel at home as well. His many stories will remain current for years to come, and the Indian boys and girls of today will doubtless pass them on to their own children, who, in turn, will feel that they personally had known *Papaji* as he was affectionately called.

We who knew him personally will always remember him as a well-turned-out, robust figure, yet one that did not give an impression of weight because of the lightness and the elasticity of his step. His head was leonine, the forehead very high and broad, the eyebrows bushy, the eyes expressive and alert, with a twinkle in them that gave evidence of his fine humor. A well-cared-for mustache and a neatly trimmed, pointed beard gave him the appearance of a Continental statesman.

Gass always spoke in short and terse sentences, characteristic also of his style of writing. This expressed the decisiveness that was part of his character. His prodigious memory and his keen intellect made it easy for him to marshal facts readily and to reach conclusions without hesitation. These qualities enabled him to do a tremendous amount of work in an amazingly short time. Thus he always found leisure for reading or for his hobby, gardening. He was an accomplished botanist, and knew how to handle various plants, knew their habits as though they were his children. He therefore always produced the best chrysanthemums and roses in the city, and although he freely shared his plants as well as his knowledge, with his friends, nobody could succeed in producing the same kind of flowers. One of his friends often jokingly accused him of withholding just one little secret that accounted for his success and their failure.

His interests and duties were extremely varied. Every morning he gave out medicine to the sick who came to his office-dispensary. He loved to teach in the theological school that he had founded. He was manager of St. Paul's High School up to the time of his death, having built it on the foundation of the little middle school he took over soon after coming to Raipur. In his younger days, he played football and tennis, and was a trained gymnast and a first-class swimmer. He held the position of honorary secretary of the Raipur Leper Asylum, of which he was a co-founder, for about thirty years, and the lepers loved him as a father. He was agent in India of the Board of Foreign Missions of his church, and president

of the mission for over thirty years. His way of speaking to simple villagers gave them confidence in this man whose love they could sense as they met him. He opened many outstations and village schools, and in his younger years carried on an extensive evangelistic touring program that gave him a thorough acquaintance with his field. At the same time he did much evangelistic work, and he used to say: "I have preached on practically every street corner of Raipur." He was widely known and liked among the leading men of the town, and served as a nominated member of the Raipur municipality. Because of his knowledge of botany, he was asked to take over the government garden in Raipur. During the great famine of 1900, he was in charge of a large famine camp. This varied activity gave him deep insight into the character of the rank and file of the Chhattisgarhi people. The Government honored him on three occasions, awarding him the Kaisar-i-Hind silver medal, the Coronation medal, and the Silver Jubilee medal; and his church honored him by conferring on him the title of Doctor of Divinity.

He wrote interestingly, and in connection with the work of the seminary put out a commentary on the Book of Romans and began to write the Life of Christ in Hindi.

The period of mission history covered by the career of Dr. Gass was one of rare expansion and growth. Founded in 1868, the mission had just completed twenty-five years of existence when he arrived. Three stations had been opened by that time, and there were only six missionaries on the field. During his forty-six years of service, the number of main stations was doubled and the territory set aside as the particular field of the mission was greatly extended. One of the most fruitful areas was added to the field by arrangement with the English Baptists, who found it difficult to give the work sufficient attention. It is in this part of India that group movements toward Christianity began a number of years ago and still continue with such splendid results. The number of missionaries on the field at the time of his death had grown to thirty.

Gass would be the last man to assert that this growth and expansion was due to his work and influence as missionary and mission president; a great many forces acted together to make it possible. The increase in the number of missionaries, as well as the great changes taking place in the country itself, must also not be over-

looked. Nevertheless, it is perfectly true to say that Gass was the very man needed for such a time. He was quick to recognize opportunities and to seize them, fearlessly entering doors as they were opened. His influence upon mission policy and his ability to introduce and adopt new methods determined in large measure the course followed by both the conference on the field and the Home Board. In all the years of his service few decisions were made by the Board without first consulting Gass and taking his advice. And the great confidence people of all degrees in India had in him contributed much to the success the mission achieved in his time.

Perhaps the greatest development Gass was privileged to witness and to foster took place in the Indian Church. When he arrived on the field the missionaries were in sole charge of all the Christian congregations. There were no elders and no ordained Indian pastors. The great advance since then becomes apparent when one considers that the Indian Christian Church of this area is today independent and a member of the United Church of Northern India. Under the leadership of Gass, the policy of the mission to place the growing Church on an independent and self-supporting basis was consistently pursued. The first stage was the election of elders, who were taught how to help govern and organize the congregation. These Councils of Elders met in 1920 in a General Council, which prepared the way for the organization of an independent body. In 1926, this body in turn became the India Mission District of the Home Church, placed on the same basis as the Home Mission districts in America, being governed by its own constitution, its own president, and its own executive committee. Similarly, each congregation began to be governed by its own constitution. It was a great occasion for Dr. Gass when the Church was admitted by the General Assembly of the United Church of Northern India. He expressed his feeling regarding church union in characteristic fashion when he said: "We have come to achieve church union, and not to talk about it." The remark was occasioned by a speech made by a bishop of a sister denomination, who brought fraternal greetings and spoke at some length of the desirability of church union, then listed the difficulties that seemed to make it impossible.

Gass was unusually vigorous in mind and body up to the age of seventy-two. After a comparatively brief illness, he peacefully fell asleep on the twenty-fifth of June, 1940, content and eager to obey

the last summons of his Master. As someone wrote to Mrs. Gass in a letter of sympathy: "Now we must try to be worthy of his memory and live as bravely as he did. Absent from the body, he is present with the Lord and the Lord is present with us, so we take courage and press on."

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edited by MABEL H. ERDMAN

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